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ABSTRACT

In this study, the interview method was used to describe the characteristics of new elementary school teachers in an induction context. In particular, the research was designed to: (1) reveal new teacher motivations, attitudes, and expectations; (2) identify the concerns of beginning teachers and the support personnel most helpful to beginning teachers; (3) assess the impact of the teaching context on the first year of teaching; and (4) reveal what changes in teacher practice beginning teachers would make in a new year. During the course of the school year, the nine clinical support teachers in the induction program administered an interview at three different times to 18 beginning teachers. The interview consisted of seven open-ended questions on teacher motivation, teacher attitudes, new teacher expectations, new teacher needs, sources of new teacher support, and the impact of the teaching context or teaching practice. An analysis of interview responses is offered and a comparison is made between these results and those of previous research on the topic. It is tentatively concluded that the teacher induction context may produce new teachers who are more motivated to continue teaching, more open to receiving support, and more focused on the instructional process during their initial teacher year. The verbatim interview questions and teaching characteristics are listed in tables. (JD)

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CHARACTERISTICS OF BEGINNING TEACHERS IN AN INDUCTION CONTEXT [1]

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CHARACTERISTICS OF BEGINNING TEACHERS IN AN INDUCTION CONTEXT

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Structured teacher induction programs have emerged across the country. Eleven states have mandated induction programs for all school districts, and 21 other states are either piloting or planning state-wide induction efforts (Hawk and Robards, 1987). As induction programs continue to emerge, it becomes increasingly important to characterize fully the beginning teacher within an induction context.

Our previous research has been directed toward identifying those needs that are unique to beginning teachers undergoing induction to the teaching profession. This has been accomplished by observing the actual functioning of an elementary induction support program (Odell, 1986b), by recording the questions new elementary teachers ask of induction support personnel across their first year of teaching (Odell, Loughlin and Ferraro, 1987), and by identifying the developmental level of teaching for new teachers using a Stages of Concerns questionnaire (Odell, 1987). In general, this research has served to characterize the evolution of the new teacher and tentatively to define the types of support needed in the induction of developing teachers.

The present research used the interview method to describe further the characteristics of new elementary teachers in an induction context. In particular, the research was designed: to reveal new teacher motivations, attitudes, and expectations; to identify the concerns of beginning teachers and the support personnel most helpful to beginning teachers; to assess the impact of the teaching context on the first year of teaching; and to reveal what changes in teacher practice new teachers would make in a new year.

Procedure

The data were obtained within the context of a large-scale elementary school teacher induction program that is a collaborative effort between a college of education and a major school district (Odell, 1986a). The subjects were 18 teachers, 16 female and 2 males, who were drawn randomly from 180 first-year elementary teachers receiving weekly induction support from 9 clinical support teachers. The clinical support teachers were veteran classroom teachers who were released from classroom duties in order to work full-time assisting the 180 beginning teachers. The 18 beginning teachers chosen for this study were all recent graduates holding baccalaureate degrees in elementary education.

During the course of the school year, the clinical support teachers administered an interview three times to the 18 beginning teachers: during the first two weeks of school, after the mid-year holiday break, and in the last month of school. On the average, an interview took approximately 30 minutes to complete.

The interview consisted of seven open-ended questions that were read to the beginning teacher by a clinical support teacher. Four of the seven questions were asked in each of the three interviews while the remaining three questions varied across the interviews. Each of the resultant interview questions was assumed to access one of the following seven characteristics: teacher motivation, teacher attitude, new teacher expectations, new teacher needs, sources of new teacher support, the impact of the teaching context, or teaching practice. The verbatim interview questions and teaching characteristics are listed in Table 1. Teacher

Insert Table 1 about here.

responses to questions related to new teacher challenges/concerns were further subdivided into seven categories of needed support based on those used in a previous study, as shown in Table 2 (Odell, Loughlin, and Ferraro, 1987).

Insert Table 2 about here.

The interviews were tape recorded for later transcription and analysis. Teacher responses to the questions as recorded and transcribed were then tallied using verbatim phrases so as to create a description of new teachers in an induction context.

Results

In order to summarize the responses to the teacher motivation, teacher attitude, teacher expectation, sources of new teacher support, teaching context and teaching practice questions, the percentage of subjects giving a particular response was determined.

With respect to teacher motivation, during Interview I nine different reasons were given by the 18 subjects for becoming a teacher. Enjoyment of children or school was cited by 66.7% of the new teachers, and was the most frequently cited motivation. Wanting to be a teacher since childhood was mentioned by 22.2%, and 16.7% mentioned being motivated by previous teachers of their own. The remaining responses were more individualistic and followed no discernible trend.

In general, the new teacher attitude questions revealed that the new teachers had very positive feelings about teaching. In Interview II teachers were asked how they felt about their decision to be a teacher. All teachers but one responded positively with comments such as: "feels good," "right choice," "enjoy the profession," and "satisfied." The one other teacher said that she felt "good and bad depending on the day." Interview III revealed a similarly positive attitude about teaching, with 100% of the new teachers saying that they would decide to be a teacher if they had it to do over again. The expanded answers to this question, such as "Teaching is challenging," "I love working with the kids," and "I find teaching rewarding," also suggested uniformly positive attitudes about teaching.

The teacher expectation question revealed that subjects more often say that teaching is different than they expected than they say that it is the same as expected. Specifically, responses that teaching is different than expected encompassed 88.5% , 94.4%, and 76.2% of all the expectation responses in Interviews I, II, and III, respectively. Subjects were less consistent regarding the particular ways that teaching is different than they expected. In Interview I, 33% of the subjects said that teaching is more difficult than they expected, and 16.7% listed classroom management as different than expected. The remaining responses specifically identifying the ways that teaching is different were quite variable and mentioned by only one new teacher. In Interview II, 16.7% of the subjects listed time management as more difficult than expected. In Interview III, 16.7% of the subjects responded that the work was harder than expected. All other responses to the expectation question in Interviews II and III were completely individual and demonstrated no particular pattern of response.

Sources of support for new teachers were determined through two questions in Interviews I and II and through one question in Interview III. In response to the questions of who has been helpful in dealing with challenges and concerns faced by the new teachers, colleague teachers were identified by 58.4%, 55.6%, and 50% of the subjects, clinical support teachers were identified by 44.7%, 58.3%, and 83.3% of the subjects, and principals were listed by 13,9%, 13.9%, and 33,3% of the subjects in Interview I and II and III, respectively. Several other sources of support in dealing with concerns and facing challenges were identified but were listed by no more than one subject. There was a tendency, however, to list family members such as mother, spouse, and brother.

The impact of the teaching context on teaching was explored in all three interviews by asking teachers whether there was anything about their school or community that makes teaching particularly easy or difficult. In all three interviews responses included factors that make teaching difficult. Parent or family difficulties comprised 36% of the 14 factors listed in Interview I, 46% of the 13 factors listed in Interview II, and 100% of the 7 factors listed in Interview III. No other factors related to difficulty were listed more than once. In terms of the factors that make teaching particularly easy, the modal factor in Interviews I, II, and II, respectively, was staff support (33.3%), parental support (45.4%) and, principal support (41.2%).

One teacher-practice question, "What will you do differently next year?", was asked in Interview III. There were a total of 26 responses from the 18 new teachers, 50% of which were related directly to instruction (e.g.,

"restructure the reading program," "plan more small-group instruction," "individualize instruction more"). The other 50% of the responses were related to changes the new teachers would make in their own behaviors (e.g., "relax more," "be more flexible," "set higher expectations for children").

New-teacher needs were determined through two questions in each of the three interviews. The responses to the questions of what are your biggest challenges and concerns were subdivided into seven categories of needed support, as shown previously in Table 2.. Table 3 lists the percentage of responses in each of the seven need categories for all three interviews, as well as the mean percent responses for the three interviews combined.

Insert Table 3 about here.

By way of overview, instructional needs were identified most frequently in each interview occurring 36.4%, 56.8%, and 45.8% of the time in Interviews I, II, and III, respectively. System needs fell from 9.9% in Interview I to only 2.8% in Interview II, but increased to 20.8% in Interview III as the new teachers evinced concern over their job status for the ensuing school year. The resource, emotional, and parental categories received less focus with all percentages falling below seven percent. Management needs were identified frequently during Interview I (23.3%) and declined over time in Interviews II (13.4%) and III (8.3%) as teachers presumably became more effective in organizing the school day. Needs related to discipline remained fairly stable from Interview I (17.1%) to Interview II (18.7%) but fell somewhat at Interview III (12.5%).

Discussion

The data presented above, obtained in a teacher induction context, indicate that the majority of teachers are motivated to begin teaching by their enjoyment of children and school and that they maintain a very positive attitude about teaching across the induction year. Indeed, all of the new teachers at the end of their first year said that they would decide to begin teaching if they had that decision to make over again. This is encouraging given the disturbing statistic that 15 percent of new teachers not in structured induction programs leave the profession after the first year (Schlechty and Vance, 1983).

Over the past several years, there has been considerable attention given to the perils of beginning teaching (Glassberg, 1979; Sprinthall and Thies-Sprinthall, 1983; Veenman, 1984). More specifically, teachers entering the profession without induction support suffer "reality shock" in which there is a collapse of ideals, formed in the process of teacher training, under the tremendous pressures of classroom teaching. It is a tribute to the concept of teacher induction that the new teachers in this program maintained a very positive attitude about teaching. This may be because the induction support offered to the new teachers served to lessen the teaching pressures they experienced. Almost all of the new teachers did say, however, that teaching is different from what they had expected in that teaching and aspects of time management were considerably more difficult than they had anticipated.

All of the new teachers found a variety of sources of support in dealing with the concerns and challenges they face. Somewhat more than half of the teachers found support in their teaching colleagues throughout the school

year, although the influence of these colleagues declined some across time. Interestingly, the clinical support teachers became increasingly relied upon for support as the school year progressed, with more than 80% of the teachers using them as a source of support at the end of the school year. School principals were also seen as supportive by some of the teachers, but overall school principals were not viewed as a particularly strong source of support by the new teachers.

First-year teachers are often uncomfortable with those in evaluative positions (Fox and Singletary, 1986). In a study by Huffman and Leak (1996), new teachers viewed support personnel as "friendly critics" offering beneficial feedback and constructive criticism only if the support personnel were not in a formal evaluative role. In the present induction context, clinical support teachers were not involved in the evaluative process. Accordingly, it is not surprising that the clinical support teachers, who were offering assistance without assessment (Odell, 1988), were identified by the new teachers as ultimately the most supportive in helping to meet the challenges and concerns of beginning teaching.

With respect to the teaching context, parental and family difficulties clearly represent a negative contextual factor for the major number of new teachers. Obviously, this widely recognized contextual adversity is not completely ameliorated by a teacher induction context, and most likely will not be eliminated altogether in the absence of broader social change.

Of the significant categories of support needed by the new teachers that were revealed in the present interviews, two changed across time in predictable fashions. Support relating to administrative procedures of the

school district was more needed at the end of the school year as teachers became concerned about their future employment. Support in managing and organizing the school day was most needed at the beginning of the school year and became less important at the end of the year when the new teachers had gained experience as a classroom instructional leader.

The two most frequently identified needs of the new teachers, those of support in the instructional process and in managing children, remained evident across the school year. In our previous research, the needs of new teachers in an induction context were assessed by observing the nature of support offered to new teachers by clinical support teachers (Odell, 1986b), and by recording the questions that new teachers asked of clinical support teachers across their first year of teaching (Odell, Loughlin, and Ferraro, 1987). Both of these approaches yielded data consistent with the present interview data in finding that supporting new teachers in the instructional process is far and away the most critical aspect of a teacher induction program.

On the other hand, the prior research found that new teachers only infrequently asked clinical support teachers for guidance and ideas related to managing children and that clinical support teachers rarely offered new teachers spontaneous discipline support as compared to other categories of support. These data clearly indicated that discipline does not represent a major concern of new teachers. This conclusion is at odds with other data obtained using an interview procedure (Veenman, 1984), including the present interview data, which show that discipline is a concern of major proportions to the new teacher. It may well be that the various methods of assessing the

needs of beginning teachers in an induction context tap different dimensions of teacher needs. For example, the previously used direct observational approaches may be primarily recording the frequency of needed teacher support while the present post hoc interview procedure may be primarily assessing the intensity of teacher concerns. In other words, discipline problems may not occur with a very high frequency for the new teacher, but when they do so, they may be perceived by the new teacher to be of considerable intensity.

The present data do not directly reveal whether the characteristics of new teachers in an induction context differ substantially from those of new teachers not receiving structured induction support. However, in contrasting the present induction context data with the general literature pertaining to the characteristics of new teachers (*e.g.*, Hawk, 1984; Lortie, 1975; Ryan, et al., 1980), it would appear that the teacher induction context may produce new teachers who are characterized as being more motivated to continue teaching, more open to the receipt of support, and more focused on the instructional process during their initial teaching year.

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Footnotes

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Table 1

Teaching Characteristics Accessed by Individual Interview Questions During Interviews I, II, or III

Teaching Characteristics	Interview Questions
Motivation Interview I	Why did you decide to become a teacher?
Attitude Interview II	How do you feel about your decision to become a teacher?
Interview III	If you had it to do over again, would you decide to become a teacher?
Teaching Practice Interview III	What would you do differently in a new year?
Challenges Interviews I, II	Currently what are your biggest challenges?
Support Personnel Interviews I, II	Who has been helpful in dealing with the challenges?
Interviews I, II, III	Who has been the most helpful so far?
Concerns Interviews I, II, III	What concerns you the most right now?
Expectations Interviews I, II, III	In what ways has teaching been similar to or different from what you expected?
Context Interviews I, II, III	What about this school or community makes teaching particularly easy or difficult?

Table 2

Categories of Needed Support Used to Characterize Challenges and Concerns of New Teachers

Example Challenge/ Concern	Needed Support Category	Description of Support Category
Individualizing math activities	Instruction	Giving information to new teachers about teaching strategies
Meeting administrative expectations	System	Giving information to new teachers related to procedures and guidelines of the school district
Accumulating teaching materials	Resource	Collecting, disseminating, or locating resources for use by new teachers
Surviving the first year	Emotional	Offering new teachers personal support through empathic listening and by sharing experiences
Time allocation for instruction	Managerial	Helping new teachers manage and organize the school day
Dealing with parental expectations	Parental	Giving new teachers help with ideas related to conferencing with parents
Maintaining control	Discipline	Giving new teachers ideas related to managing children

Table 3

Percentage of Challenge and Concern Responses Made by New Teachers in Each Category of Needed Support for Each Interview and for the Mean of the Three Interviews Combined

Needed Support Category	Interview I	Interview II	Interview III	Mean %
Instruction	36.4	56.8	45.8	46.3
System	9.9	2.8	20.8	11.2
Resource	3.7	0.0	0 0	1.2
Emotional	3.9	2.8	6.2	4.3
Managerial	23.3	13.4	8.3	15.0
Parental	5.9	5.5	6.3	5.9
Discipline	17.1	18.7	12.5	16.1